

3-4-2003

Interview with Gary Cook

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Recommended Citation

Gary Cove, interview by Michael Hillard, March 4, 2003, Stories of Maine's Paper Plantation, Digital Maine, Maine's Economic Improvement Fund, Digital Commons, University of Southern Maine

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Gary Cook

Impressions after interview:

- Was directly involved in bringing Jane Slaughter. It was organized through the Maine Scott Council (D'oh – I should have asked him about the general functions and purposes of the Maine Scott Council). The purpose was to sharpen the locals' understanding of the issues surrounding cooperation and work reorganization, so that Scott would not manipulate them.
- His peroration at the end was consistent with Beck's observation that the Maine-based folks were generally antipathetical towards jointness and had a sort of class-conscious view of labor relations.
- Very important: the on-going solidarity (?) meetings organized by UPIU at Westbrook that included all union locals in anticipating an offensive by Scott similar to IP's.

MH: Well let me start by asking what your position was at the time.

GC: Well, at the time I was the International Representative servicing the mill in Westbrook, and many other mills.

MH: Did that include the other Scott mills in Maine?

GC: No, it did not.

MH: What about the other two Scott mills – the Winslow tissue mill and Somerset?

GC: No I did not.

MH: Would that have been Gordon Roderick?

GC: At one time. Prior to that it would have been George Lamberson.

MH: That's right. I've heard that. And how did you come to that position?

GC: Well, I was a local union officer in Local 14 in Jay, Maine, and then became Secretary-Treasurer of the Maine AFL-CIO, and I came out to organize for a year, and then they hired me as international representative.

MH: I see, I see. And how long had you been international representative?

GC: From 1975 through 1992.

MH: So you knew Local 1069 very well.

GC: Very well.

MH: Well maybe we can just start with that. What can you tell me about the mill and the local at the time?

GC: Well, at the time I took over, it was a very productive mill. It probably had, uh, 1600 to 1700 mill members, and, at the time, about six different unions, local unions. Local 1069 later merged with the old Pulp and Sulphite local, and became Local 1069, with all the production workers.

It was very militant local, well-educated, good officers.

MH: Right. You would have been there when Marv Ewing was still President.

GC: Yeah. I went through Marv Ewing, Andy Lestage, Bill Carver.

MH: And, so, what would you say, until the period of the late eighties, was the nature of labor relations at the mill?

GC: Very adversarial. Uh, we'd go through spells of cooperation, where things would go pretty good, and so on, and then it would be a direct, adversary relationship. It usually tempered itself around contract negotiations. The company would become more militant, and the local would become more militant, and so on.

MH: And what was your perception, on the company side, of where – as you put it – that militance was coming from? Was it local people; was it corporate, did you have a sense of what the dynamics were?

GC: Well I think it was both. I think the corporate drove the local people, where they were. They also had a spokesman for the S.D. Warren Company at the time who really didn't like unions very well, Nelson Wayman.

MH: I see, I see. So you think he sparked a lot of the ?

GC: I believe he did. Yeah. Plus, the mill was only organized in nineteen sixty-eight [1968]. And, it was still going through the throes of trying to operate without a union, and couldn't really get used to where it was going. Scott management really didn't stick its nose in too much into what S. D. Warren was doing.

MH: Ok. So it was the S.D. Warren Division where that was coming from. OK. What would you say the contrast was, as far as you knew it, to the other Scott mills in Maine – Somerset and Winslow – in terms of the general temper of labor relations?

GC: Well, a lot more grievances, and a lot more arbitration cases. During the time I was there, there was two strikes, which was pretty much different from the other. The others had one each, during that time period, I think.

MH: So the S.D. Warren local was quicker to strike?

GC: I think, yeah.

MH: Let's talk about the jointness initiative. And why don't I start with your view about it. I know that – I first learned this from Bill Carver – that the international had, for probably most of the most of the eighties, been critical of team-type initiatives, on the part of companies. But then [it] switched gears under Scott, because of John Nee's initiative. What was your view of all of that?

GC: Well I think, yeah, well there was an opposition to, some of the circle, quality-of-life circles and some of that sort of stuff. Really, the union didn't have as much involvement as it should have, it was kind of directed from the top. About eighty-six [1986], after the strike in Rumford, then in eighty-seven [1987] in the strike at Jay, there was some real concern about Scott was going. And we really thought that they were getting ready to take us on, from the actions we saw around the mill, and so on, and we were going into negotiations, I believe it was in nineteen eighty-eight [1988].

So we started doing a lot of solidarity work around bringing all the locals together, and trying to get some true solidarity among the locals, [so] that when they did decide to take us on, we'd know where to go and how to fight 'em.

MH: And this would be the three Scott locals, in particular?

GC: No, no, it would be all of the locals at the Westbrook mill.

MH: Oh, I see.

GC: All of the contracts were negotiated locally. So we were trying to build some real solidarity, especially between the trades and the paperworkers.

MH: How did you go about doing that?

GC: Well, we had a number of training meetings, uh, we were meeting with them on an almost weekly basis to try and develop that. And it was going pretty well. My sense is that Scott saw this, and decided that they really didn't want that fight. We were told that in fact at a couple of meetings of the paper industry that Scott had made the claim that they were about to wake a sleeping giant, and thought that the industry was going in the wrong direction.

Close to negotiations, I think it was about five months before, or four months before, Scott contacted then-Vice President DiNardo, through John Nee, who had worked with DiNardo, I think at Champion, and talked about how they wanted to do a jointness program, and whether or not we could get involved in it. And that's where it pretty much started from.

MH: Ok. Well I guess one question I would be interested in would be: describe how you were first presented the idea, and what your reaction was to it, initially.

GC: My initial reaction, when I heard about it, was – if they were serious about it really being a joint program, then it was something we were interested in.

MH: Ok, Ok. So you were receptive to it.

GC: I was. The local was not as receptive.

MH: I understand that. And, uh, let me hear you talk about that a little bit. It seemed to me, at least the way Bill Carver described it, that it was kind of a hard sell. It felt like there were a lot reasons to distrust the companies at that point in time, and Scott in particular. So what is your view of that?

GC: Yeah, yeah, that's pretty much where they are coming from. Of course, there had been a real move against circle, quality of circles, and all that sort of stuff, that we felt just really wasn't very good. And many of the ideas they espoused were contrary to the kind of things that we really believed in. There was a certain group among them that really thought about, you know, job training, and a lot of things that were really anti-contracts. I would say production line kind-of-a set-ups that were really different than a continuous operation like a paper mill. And some of the examples that were cited at the time were plants where the crews would discipline themselves, do that sort of a thing. And it was something that was pretty foreign to us; it was not something that we wanted to be involved in.

MH: Mmm-hmm. So, in a sense, taking on some of the responsibilities that were really management's?

GC: Yeah. One of the mills that they took the guys out to visit in one instance, where they claimed they had no discipline problems, but when they got down to talking to them about it, it was that the crew would actually ride these guys, and so, until they did whatever was wanted, and that was something that was just foreign to what we believed that should be done.

MH: Did you go on any of those trips?

GC: No, I didn't go on any of those trips.

MH: But you heard about it?

GC: Yeah. It was those kinds of things that we were not willing to get involved in. We would work to see what we could do to save money, improve production ideas, and so on, but we're not willing to go the route of member squealing on member, member turning members in, members pushing members, uh, to do what management should be doing.

And so we were opposed to that, I was opposed to that sort of thing. I think as it developed later on, most of that stuff was taken out of the program, and really wasn't something we had to deal with.

MH: I see, I see. I understand that this was something that was presented to the Scott Council, or at least some of it was?

GC: Well some of it was. Eventually, they went to the Scott Council, brought forth this whole idea, and part of the deal with getting into jointness was that the company was not going to seek concessions in bargaining, which all the other companies was seeking in bargaining at the time. The reduction of double-time on Sunday, and some of those issues. And holiday pay, and things like that.

MH: What was your perception of John Nee. Do you think that John Nee was effective in presenting his ideas?

GC: I think that he is effective. I think that John Nee is a very honest, straightforward guy. Uh, you know, he was working for the company and not for the union, but I think, yeah, he's pretty straightforward, he's a good guy to deal with. Our relationship with John Nee has been very good.

MH: But for some reason or another, I got the feeling that the local didn't see him that way.

GC: Well, they didn't trust him. You got to remember, John Nee had originally worked in that mill. John Nee, in fact, had originally been part of the crew that was organizing the mill. After he became the local union president, he went back to school, and then took a job with management. That's not the type of people that members are normally going to trust.

MH: So did people in the local remember that part of his history?

GC: Some did, some didn't.

Note: the following is a key passage explaining the Jane Slaughter training, with Cook's active involvement and support. His point is that it was to arm the locals with strong bullshit detectors so that they could separate the wheat from the chaff.

MH: Well, one thing I'm intrigued by is that I came across the fact, in one of my interviews, that – I think it was the locals – the Scott locals, that brought in Jane Slaughter...

GC: Mmm-hmmn. [yes]

MH: To do training. Tell me what you know about that training, you know: who organized it? How it fit into...

GC: Well I was part of the organizing of that. One of the things that we were doing – we looked at this, we wanted to take on the critical aspects, take a look at all the bad parts, and know how to combat it. Jane Slaughter had written a couple of books, on quality circles, and she had a partner...

MH: Mike Parker.

GC: Exactly. And I think there was another one about winning, or something. Anyway, we brought them in to educate people on the dangers of the quality circles, and what they should be looking for.

MH: And at what point, had the jointness initiative been brought up at that point?

GC: I'm trying to remember if it had been or not. I'm not sure. I think it was prior to, or it might have been shortly afterwards, I really don't recall.

MH: Were you concerned that her message might make it difficult for the locals to ultimately participate in something like that?

GC: No, no. In fact, what I had hoped would come out of that was that if they were going to get involved, they do it in the right manner. So that they could put in all the safeguards that they need to put in, and watch out for the dangers.

MH: So we are talking about this training, and let me make sure that I get to a few questions about that before we move on. So tell me: who do you recall being involved in organizing it? Carl Turner I think?

GC: I believe Carl Turner was, I don't recall if Gordon Roderick was or not...

MH: And what about the Winslow local, were they as involved?

GC: I don't remember.

MH: I am trying to learn who was the president of that local. Was it Pelletier?

GC: That's right. Leo ...

MH: Do you know if he is still around?

GC: No, I don't. Of course that mill closed, and everybody's just kind of drifted away.

MH: And I presume that you invited the craft locals to these trainings?

GC: I think we did. At the time, we were running what we called the Maine Scott Council. And I believe that some of them were in it, and I believe that is who actually had sponsored this whole conference.

MH: I see, I see. Did you recall anything specific about how the training went, and what kinds of things were said?

GC: No, no.

MH: Over time, then, and you were there for three or four years of this, and that enabling was a sort of specific phase of it, what's your perception of how the program worked in the three different mills.

GC: Well in Winslow, there is no question that it worked very well. In fact, they had taken that mill from being the high-cost producer of away-from-home tissue, to the low-cost producer in the Scott chain. The only thing that did it in was when Kimberly Clark bought the chain. If that had remained Scott, they would have been a viable part of the production today. In Hinckley, I think they progressed a lot further than we did in Westbrook.

MH: And do you attribute that to the rank-and-file and the local leaders being more receptive?

GC: I think that was true, yeah. I think they were much more receptive. There wasn't as much receptiveness in Westbrook, and we put a lot of provisos on all of the stuff to make sure that they didn't step on the union's toes, that the people selected for the committees were selected by the union. We had provisions on how much time people could have away from their job; there were just a lot of things that were put in. I think that some good progress was made on some productivity issues and some cost saving issues, but it certainly didn't progress to the point Winslow had.

MH: I understand that when it got to a key point, and people describe this differently so I'm still trying to sort out the blind men and the elephant, but I believe it was ninety-four [1994], I believe it was after Dunlap had taken over Scott, and it had probably merged with Kimberly-Clark at that point, but that there was a contract reopening done at 1069 to put in new language about enabling. Do you recall that process?

GC: I don't believe, I don't recall that in 1994. The enabling language was put in probably in 88, or 90.

MH: Right, right. This was kind of a, I guess what I'm referring to was later in the story.

GC: Oh, oh. What they were doing at that point in time was, I think, was really trying to take the local on, and remove most of the enabling language, and so on, and change it in such a manner that it would lose all of its effectiveness. Ok, I was the Vice-President at that point in time; I was not involved in the negotiations. I do recall that, yeah.

MH: I remember that, the way the local leaders described it is that they kind of recommended it distastefully to the membership and the membership rejected it. Is that how you remember it happening?

GC: I believe that's true.

MH: Yeah, yeah. Do you remember anything more specific? How was the international looking at it at that point?

GC: At that point in time, you know, we were actually, in 94-95, I think we were involved in trying to buy the mill at that point,

MH: Right, that had taken place,

GC: So a lot of things were going on at that point. And the company would never really give us the kind of information we needed to purchase it.

MH: So did you think then that the failure of the various initiatives, at least at Westbrook, really was impacted by what was happening at the very top of Scott?

GC: No question. At that point in time, Dunlap had taken over. He was trying to divest Westbrook. In fact, he was trying to divest the entire company, little did we know. So there were a lot of things being driven. **And there was a whole attitude that had taken over in the lower management that during the jointness, the union had owned the mill, and they were going to take it back.** Laughs.

Note: this is very interesting. He's suggesting that folks like Murray and Finkelman felt like top management – especially Nee, had gone over their heads and taken away some of their control, and that the local mill management could now reclaim some of this power under the post-Nee regime.

MH: Whose view was that, lower management?

GC: Well, middle management. Local HR, that sort of thing. So we were getting those kinds of comments all of the time.

MH: I see. So the local lower and middle management was, in a sense, accusing the local of trying to manipulate the process for their own ends?

GC: No. What they were saying was that top management had forsaken them, and wouldn't allow them to run the mill any more.

MH: I see, I see. So it was more [that] they were fearful of being cut out?

GC: They were ready to take it back.

MH: The local managers.

If you were to stand back then, and you certainly were participating on the Scott Council through all of this, how would you put in perspective how well the program worked? It apparently worked well in some other places like Marinette and Mobile. **Why do you think it had more trouble in Maine than it did in other places?**

GC: I think it's attitude. Maine locals are much more militant than the southern locals. I think that they have a longer history in unionization, and the adversarial relationship between companies and unions.

MH: What kind of factor was the Jay strike?

GC: It was a big factor, I think. If you take what happened at IP, I mean, IP was, for years, the leader in labor relations in the paper industry. And then in the late eighties [1980s], it just rolled over and became the worst. They went from people really trusting them, and wanting to get along with them, to where it was a complete adversarial relationship. **That drove a lot of activity in a lot of places. And just changed a lot of attitudes. And so there was a complete mistrust, even where you had a good relationship with companies.**

MH: Now, it's my understanding that there was a lot of participation and interaction between the other mills in the state and the strike in Jay.

GC: Very much, very much, yeah.

MH: Why don't you describe that for me, as you saw it.

GC: Well, all of the mills realized that the stuff that IP came after in the Jay contract was stuff that they were going to face in all of the plants, and so there was a real feeling of solidarity behind the strike. Most of the plants were collecting money every week to give to those strikers, some of them as much as ten dollars a member a week. They had dues assessments going on to help those locals, which is a first. I had never seen it in this union before, where people would actually access their members' extra money to send to a strike. It was just a general feeling of solidarity.

Every week, the members from other mills would show up at the meetings of the Jay local – bringing them contributions, helping support 'em, and so on. There were just a lot of things that people were afraid of what was happening in the industry, and it turned out to be right.

MH: I understand that some of the Local 14 strikers actually got jobs in some of the other plants, during the strike.

GC: Yeah, a lot of plants.

MH: Did that include Westbrook?

GC: Uh, I don't recall if Westbrook had any or not. I know that Hinckley did. And I know that Madison, and a couple of the other companies did, but I'm not sure about Westbrook. I think there were a couple who went there.

MH: Uh, ok. So you think the fact that there was all of that solidarity and support made it a bigger bridge to cross for these Scott locals, to trust the jointness initiative?

GC: I'm not sure how much that played on it. There had been some mistrust between management and the local for a long time. **And like I say, their relationship would just had big curves in it. It would go from adversarial [to being able] to get along for a while to adversarial, and it seemed that they would always try to start to get along just before contract negotiations, and then afterwards it would go right back to where it was, and so on.**

MH: Did you have any, while we are on that point, did you have any perceptions that, especially earlier on, of the mill management – do you think there was a difference between their perspective, their approach, their quality of trust, say – than the division office? What was your perception of the local mill management, as opposed to the Boston office?

GC: I don't think there was much difference. I think it ran about the same, and I think one spills over into the other.

MH: All right. Well I think I've covered all of the things I wanted to ask you about today. But I always finish by saying: is there something about this whole story that I didn't think to ask you, that you think I should know?

Here comes his strong peroration. His indictment is merciless and unqualified, and hits all the most often-repeated criticisms of corporate behavior:

GC: Well, I guess it is an experiment that never had a chance to get finished, because of what happened with Dunlap, and what's going on in the industry. The consolidation and so on, that's just happening in the industry. I think this industry has forsaken American workers like the steel industry has, and others, in the factories and towns where their profits were made, and where they built the companies. They have refused to put money back in, and in fact have spent much of that money overseas trying to compete with American workers, where they can. And so I think the industry has done a real disservice to the United States, to its employees, and to the communities that it has raped, and polluted, and torn apart, and cleaned out our natural resources, and now has just moved on to try and do it elsewhere.

MH: Do you think there was a time, say, you know, in the middle-to-early part of the jointness initiative where there was a company that was trying to go in a different direction?

GC: I think Scott was trying to. I think they really were trying to do some things that were going to change things, but they just didn't give it enough time. And with the advent of what's going on in the industry today... **It used to be that the industry, mostly the CEOs and so on, came out of the industry. Grew up throughout the industry; in fact, came out of the company, for the most part. Today, CEOs have a life expectancy of five to ten years, they want to rape the company for all they**

can get out of it, they don't care what's going on, on the outside;[it's] just get my money and get out. And if I can inflate stock prices by phony moves, then I'll do that. I'll have layoffs to get stock improvements; I mean, it's just crazy.

There was a time that if a company had a layoff of a thousand workers, their stock would go down. Today, they throw this bull out on the open market about how they're *cutting back* to make money. How can you cut back and make money? You've got to sell more product to make more money; it just doesn't make sense. If you were to believe them, then you would always have to believe that they have all of this fat in the industry, that they just could get rid of any time they wanted to. Well, that was never the case, and never will be the case. I mean nobody's going to run up the company that way. It's just this whole phony economy that we've been in, for the last twenty years. And it's just driven the craziest things that are going on, to the detriment of this country. I mean, we do not have a manufacturing base left in the country. If we were to really go to war, today, we couldn't win it, because we don't make enough steel.

MH: That's right, we are down to 200,000, or something like that.

GC: Yep.

MH: Anything else come to mind?

GC: No.

MH: Well, thank you very much.